Tu Bishvat and The Symmetry Between Aesthetics and Eros

Based on a homily by
R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira of Munkacz
(1872-1937)[1]
in Sha’ar
Yessakhar, volume 2, p. 481-482
Translation[2] and Commentary by Shaul Magid

Professor Shaul Magid is the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Chair of Jewish Studies at Indiana University. This text was originally prepared for a text-study at a Tu Bishvat Seder at Temple Emunah in Lexington, MA on January 27, 2002. Sincere thanks goes out to Gloria Greenfield for her organizing the seder and for co-producing a beautiful Tu Bishvat Haggadah of which this was a part. Special thanks to the editors (and readers) of the Seforim blog for their gracious consideration of this essay. Professor Magid’s most recent book is Hasidism Incarnate Hasidism: Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism (Stanford University Press, 2015), and his previous post at the Seforim blog is entitled: “‘Uman, Uman Rosh ha-Shana’: R. Nahman’s Grave as ErezYisrael”.

TEXT:
In his collected sermons Bnei Yesakhar, Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh of Dinov (d. 1829)[3] mentions a rabbinic tradition that one should pray for a beautiful etrog
on Tu Bishvat.
Examining this custom, he invokes another rabbinic dictum stating that “the way of man (ish) is to pursue a woman (isha).” The word ish (man) shares the same numerical value as the word Shevat (311). Woman in this passage corresponds to the etrog because the etrog is the only one of the Four Species (lulav, aravah, hadasim, etrog) taken on Sukkot that carries the feminine gender in Hebrew. The mystical tradition also holds that the etrog represents the sephirah Malkhut (the feminine recipient of the other three Species). We can now re-read R. Zvi Elimelekh’s insight into the first rabbinic citation in light of the second. “It is the way of man” that is, the essence of the month of Shevat, “to pursue a woman” i.e., a beautiful etrog.[4]

It is also the custom on Tu Bishvat to eat various types of fruit accompanied by the appropriate blessing “Borei Pri Ha-Etz” (Who blessed the fruit of the tree).[5] The Bnei Yesakhar interprets this custom in the following manner. Tu Bishvat falls exactly forty days before the creation of the world (according to the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua that the world was created in Nisan and not in Tishrei). When God decided (“when the ThoughtWill went up in His Mind”) to create the world, this creative process began forty days before the actual creation.[6] The letters of the word “will” (razon) (RZN) are also the letters of the word “conduit” (zinor) (ZNR) as the Kabbalists noted. This means
that the (idea of creation) descended through the Primordial Divine body (from the Mind, the sephirah Da’at- the source of the Will) through the spinal column (zinnor) until it reached Yesod (the organ of creation). The blessing “Borei Pri Ha-Etz” occurs in Yesod (as it celebrates the fulfillment and telos of the fruit).[7] We have another tradition from the zaddikim that Tu Bishvat is a time for pro-creation in that it is a cosmic time when the willful act of creation begins in the Divine Mind.

COMMENTARY:
Both of these short readings are focused on the attempt to integrate aesthetics and Eros as the two fundamental parts of the holiday of Tu Bishvat. Before pursuing a more detailed analysis of how this synthesis works, it should also be noted that the entire mystical, cosmic and psychic narrative that constitutes Hasidic discourse is rooted here in acute sensitivity to the changing natural environment. The mystics (including the Sabbateans, who were most probably the originators of the ritual of the Tu Bishvat Seder so common in popular Judaism in the late 20th century)[8] were very attuned to the changing hues of their environment and viewed this natural shift as responding to and reflecting the ever-changing cosmic world. In our texts Tu Bishvat represents the Origin before the Beginning. That is, it marks the moment in the cyclical cosmic calendar when the Divine Will is conceived, initiating a process in the highest realm of the Godhead (the Divine Mind), which emanates and subsequently culminates in creation. The emulation of this process through
human copulation
and its cyclical manifestation in Tu Bishvat requires a closer
look at the
relationship between the aesthetic and the erotic in the
Jewish mystical
imagination. Our first text teaches that the innate human
“will”
toward Eros is a reflection of the aesthetic appreciation of
nature by
juxtaposing the prayer for an etrog on Tu Bishvat with the
innate human need
for conjugal union. “The way of man is to pursue a woman,”
offers an
opinion on the nature of human sexuality, however problematic
such an assertion
may be.[9]
The etrog stands out in the biblical and
rabbinic tradition as one of the only religious objects (hefez
shel mitzvah)
where the aesthetic value of the object is the basis of its
religious status
(i.e., its kashrut). The etrog as a religious; object requires
our aesthetic
sense and appreciation because the viability of an etrog for
ritual use demands
that it is beautiful to its owner. This is the notion of hidur
as a requisite
category for the etrog. This is derived from the biblical
description of the
etrog as Pri Etz Hadar.[10] This Hasidic text suggests a
correlation between
the Eros of human sexuality and the aesthetic sensitivity
required to use an
etrog. Tu Bishvat is the time of year when the fragrance of
spring, the colors
of new life and the lengthening of days arouse both our
artistic and romantic
natures. As mentioned above, the mystics viewed the
environmental
transformation and its effect on human beings as having its
roots in the cosmic
realm. The expression of this correlation is accomplished by invoking the aesthetic appreciation of mitzvah (etrog) with the erotic realm sense necessary for creation/creativity.

The second text extends the central idea of beauty as creativity/creative-ness by viewing Tu Bishvat through the lens of the rabbinic disagreement on the date of creation. This is based on two oft-quoted rabbinic dicta. The first is the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua as to whether the world was created in Nisan or Tishrei. The second is the statement that the human embryo is only ensouled 40 days after conception. R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira suggests that these two rabbinic dicta can aid in explaining the concealed nature of this apparently minor festival that, while mentioned in the Mishna (Tractate Rosh Ha-Shana 1:1),[11] has never resulted in any significant ritual activity until the 16th century.[12]

The initial forty-day period of gestation in the embryo before ensoulment is mystically rendered as simultaneously reflecting the process of emanation from Divine Will (Pure Thought) to Action (Creation) and from erotic human desire for love (Eros) to its fulfillment in conjugal union (pro-creation). His description of the descent from the Mind (Da’at) to the sexual organ (Yesod) reflects a common medieval medical belief that the male semen is rooted in the base of the brain (in Kabbala, the sephirah Da’at) and descends via the spinal column until it reaches the male sexual organ.[13]

The will to create/procreate and the initial projection of that will toward action is rooted in the emotive faculty of the intellect,
which reaches fulfillment in the consummation of the creative/conjugal act.[14] As mentioned in the text, both in the cosmic realm and the process of ensoulment in the human embryo, this process takes forty days. Tu Bishvat falls forty days before the 25th of Adar, the first day of creation according to position that Nisan as the month of creation. This is because the first of Nisan, like the first of Tishrei, is the day of the creation of humankind, the telos, of the entire process of creation. This is the moment where the creative process begins in the Mind/Will of God, in the ethereal realm of Pure Thought. Thus, our author utilizes the kabbalistic wordplay Will (razon) and conduit (zinor) (each containing the same letters RZN), suggesting that Tu Bishvat represents the purely emotive impulse to create, the product of Eros, initiating a movement toward union that will conclude forty days later in the renewed act of creation, carrying with it all the implications of redemption.[15]
This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. The mystics, always looking to weave the cycle of the Jewish year into a seamless tapestry of erotic desire and consummation (both cosmic and human), correlate the 15th of the month of Shevat with the 15th of the month of Av, a neglected festival mentioned once in the Mishna. The similitude of these two minor festivals does not rest solely on the fact that both fall on the full moon. Rather, their correlation rests on their juxtaposition to the months of Nisan and Tishrei, the two months seen as the moment of “beginning”
in rabbinic tradition. If we look to the other talmudic stance on the date of
creation (Tishrei), we find that precisely forty days before the 25th of Elul
(the first day of creation if Rosh Ha-Shana is the creation of Adam and Eve) is
Tu B’Av (the 15th of the month of Av) which is mentioned in the last mishna in
Tractate Ta’anit 4:8.
Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, There, were no
festive days in Israel like the 15th of Av (Tu B’Av) and Yom Ha-Kippurim. On
those days the daughters of Jerusalem would go out dressed in (identical) white
garments, borrowed so as not to embarrass (the poor among them). All of the
garments first underwent ritual immersion. The daughters of Israel would go out
in circles in the vineyard. What would they say? “Young man –
Do not be
seduced by beauty, be drawn to lineage...
The Hasidic masters pick up the same line of
reasoning we suggested about Tu Bishvat regarding Tu B’Av.[16] That is, Tu B’Av
is the moment where the pure Thought of God (God’s initial act of volition) to
create the world comes into being. Such a moment yields arousal of aesthetic
beauty (“the maidens in the vineyard”) followed by the arousal of
male Eros (“as the young men gaze upon them”). Tu Bishvat, according
to our Hasidic text constitutes a similar arousal of emotion(s). However, on Tu
Bishvat, marking the blossoming natural environment, initiates
this willing for
new life and the fulfillment of human desire played out in the
relationship
between Shevat (male) and the etrog (female). On this reading
we are directed
on Tu Bishvat to simultaneously submit to the natural changing of the seasons and respond to the cosmic moment of conception. The blessing “Borei Pri Ha-Etz” is not merely limited to the consumption of fruit but also points to the celebration of aesthetics and Eros, both of which are required in order to consummate human intimacy and creativity, divine Creation, and the final redemption that is conceived before creation and unfolds in the cyclical nature of the natural world.

NOTES:

[2] I have attempted to remain fairly close to the original text in my translation although I have taken considerable liberty to elaborate at certain points. The parentheses are my insertions which do not appear in the text. Any Hasidic text eludes translation precisely because it
often originate in an oral format and little attempt is made
to transform it
into a coherent literary. R. Shapira is particularly difficult
to translate in
that his discourse is highly referential, mentioning a word or
phrase to imply
an entire complex idea.
[3] R. Zvi Elimelekh of Dinov was the
great-great grandfather of R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira. He was a leader of
Galician Hasidism in the early 19th century. We have four major
collections of
his sermons and teachings: Bnei Yessakhar
(New York, 1946), Igra D’Kala (Munkacz,
1942), Igra D’Pirka (Lemberg, 1910)
and Derekh Pekudekha (Lemberg, 1914).
The uncritical but informative hagiography Ha-Rebbe
Zvi Elimelekh mi-Dinov (Bnei Brak, 1972), by Nathan Orenter
gives us a
wealth of information about his life. R. Hayyim Elazar often
begins his
discourses in Sha’ar Yesakhar with a citation from his great-great grandfather’s
Bnei Yesakhar.
[4] See an abbreviated version of this in R.
Yeheil Michel Geller, Darkhei Hayyim
v’Shalom (the customs and practices of R. Hayyim Elazar
Shapira) (Jerusalem,
1960) p. 310. Darkhei Hayyim v’ Shalom also
mentions the custom of eating a cooked etrog that was set
aside after the
previous Sukkot. It is noted that R. Hayyim Elazar was
stringent that the etrog
should not be cooked before nightfall on the 15th of Shevat.
[5] This is likely taken from R. Avraham Avlei
of Kalish, Magen Avraham to Shulhan Arukh
‘Orakh Hayyim # 131, citing Tikkun
Yessakhar. While both Magen Avraham and R. Judah Askenazi’s
Be’er Hetiv ad loc. mention that the
custom of eating fruit only applies to Askenazi Jews, the
anonymous Pri Etz Hadar (adopted from the
Sabbatean Hemdat Yomim), p. I adds, "Sephardim also follow such a custom." No reference is given for this addition.

[6] This forty day period is based on a rabbinic opinion, not universally accepted in rabbinic or post-rabbinic literature, that the ensoulment of a human embryo only occurs forty days after conception of the child.

[7] It is also the case that the word pri is also a term denoting part of the circumcision ritual called priah, or the peeling away of the sides of the penis to reveal the crown. Thus the blessing of pri ha-etz could also be rendered to mean to disclosure of male Eros ("the way of man is to pursue woman).

[8] The most reliable and perhaps oldest text which elaborates on the ritual of the Tu Bishvat Seder is the anonymous Hemdat Yomim which is said to have probably been written either by Nathan of Gaza, Shabbatai Zevi’s closest disciple and leader of the movement after his death, or a member of his circle. It was probably first published in Izmir or Kushta although the publication date is not known. The extant edition was published in Zolkiew two or three times between 1745-1762. Cf. Yizhak Isaac ben Ya’akov Ozar Ha-Seforim (Vilna, 1880), p. 193, # 678. A practical guide to the Tu Bishvat Seder, the anonymous Pri Etz Hadar (Jerusalem, 1968), includes various readings from the Zohar which accompany the eating of various types of fruit, all of which are interpreted according to the Lurianic tradition. This pamphlet largely adopts the mystical explanations of the festival given in Hemdat Yomim.

[9] The Kabbalists were not concerned with the
biological or political nature of such dicta. They viewed such statements as teaching them something about the human condition in general which yielded a deeper understanding of the cosmic environment in which they lived.

[10] The rabbis, who offer various possibilities as to what it means, recognize the ambiguity of the word hadar. Beauty is one such rendering.

[11] The position of Tu Bishvat (the 15th of Shevat) as the “New Year for the Trees” is the position of Beit Hillel against Beit Shammai who argues for the first of Shevat. According to the structure of the Mishna alone, Beit Hillel’s position is problematic. The mishna delineates four “New Years”, each one beginning on the first day of a particular month. Only Beit Hillel suggests that regarding the New Year for the Trees, the 15th day as opposed to the first is appropriate. The Talmud explains that the disagreement is based upon meteorological estimations. The disagreement rests on determining when most of the rain has fallen for that season. This would indicate at what time fruits would start to blossom and dictate when the appropriate tithes should be taken. Of course, this agricultural debate is completely irrelevant to our Hasidic author who takes the accepted rabbinic position (the 15th) and builds an entire cosmic edifice upon it.

[12] This may very well be due to the fact that its significance, at least in the talmudic understanding of the Mishna, only relates to Temple tithes and thus is legally inoperative. Again, the mystics
are never willing to limit the significance of any event to its legalistic and ritualistic construct. It is therefore not surprising that Tu Bishvat is re-formulated and re-signified by the mystical tradition. [13] R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira is most likely deriving this from The Zohar. See Zohar 1.15a, 2.2a and The Gershom Scholem’s Annotated Zohar (Jerusalem, 1992) p. 1512, cited and discussed in E.R. Wolfson, Through a Speculum That Shines (Princeton, 1989), p. 389 and n. 236. For this theory in medieval medicine see D. Jacqert and C. Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages (Princeton, 1980), p. 53ff. [14] In light of this the mystical tradition suggests that the arousal of Eros in the human mind results in “forgetting” or loss of memory. In one Hasidic text, such a position was used to justify why Er and Onan, the sons of the biblical Judah, refused to consummate their relations with Tamar. Although the Torah is quite adamant about their wrongdoing, this text utilizes the above theory that they did not want to leave their perpetual state of devekut (communion with God) and thus refused to allow their mind to be re directed toward Eros. See R. Mordecai Joseph of Izbica, Mei Ha-Shiloah, vol. I, p. 15b,16a. [15] This connection between renewed creation and redemption justifies the centrality of Tu Bishvat in the Sabbatean teaching as a celebration of the initial moment of the final unfolding of the messianic drama. [16] Tu B’Av and Tu Bishvat are cited together in Shulhan Arukh ‘Orakh Hayyim # 131:6 regarding the custom to refrain from reciting supplication prayers
(takhanun) on those days. Outside of the custom of Ashkenazi Jews to increase
the consumption of fruit, there appears to be no other recognition of Tu Bishvat in the classical legal tradition outside of deleting takhanun.